

Spirits from the Past: Ghost of Emily and Erastus

By DEBORA BABIN KATZ

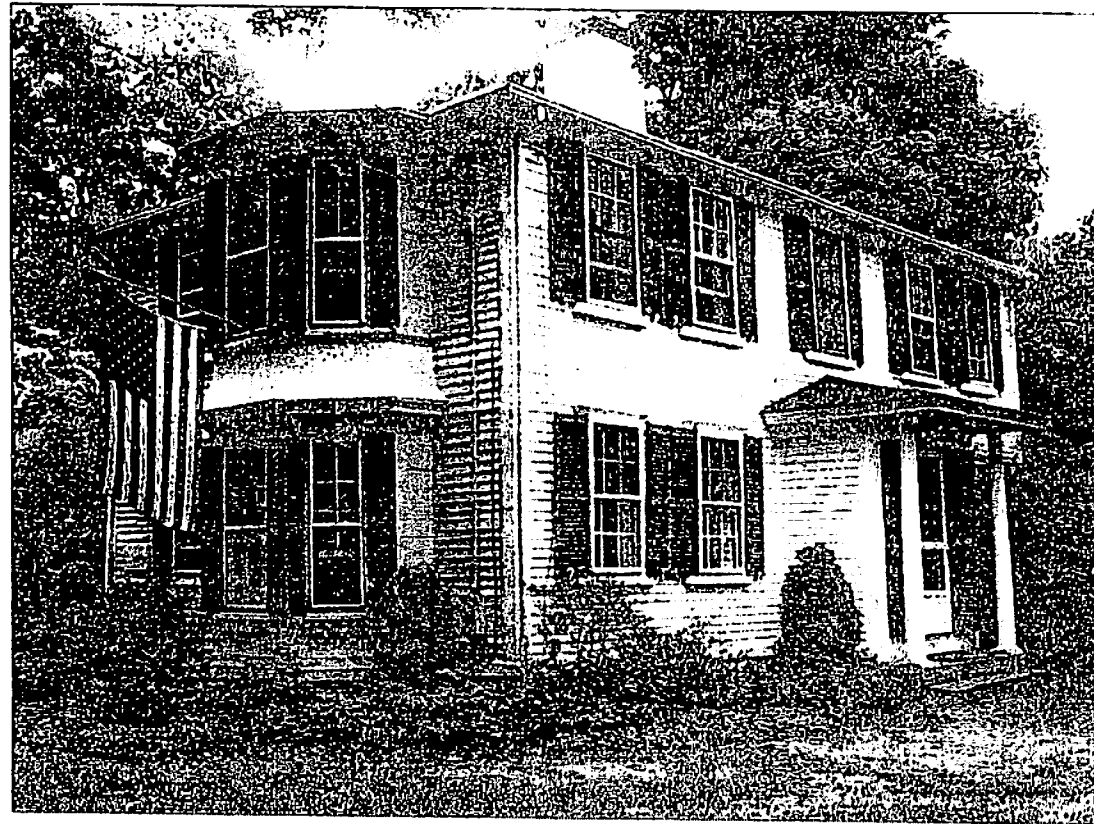
When the Hatfield family purchased the Captain Ezra Prior house on Washington Street thirty-one years ago they were unaware of any spirit living there. "We moved from a house in Maine which was built by a sea captain whose ghost haunted the place. But when we came to Duxbury with our three children, then ages 2, 5 and 7 years old, we never experienced any signs the place was haunted," noted Julie Hatfield. At least in the beginning of their ownership, for as the children grew up, it became clearer to the family that someone else was also playing here.

Julie Hatfield and husband, Timothy Leland, have not



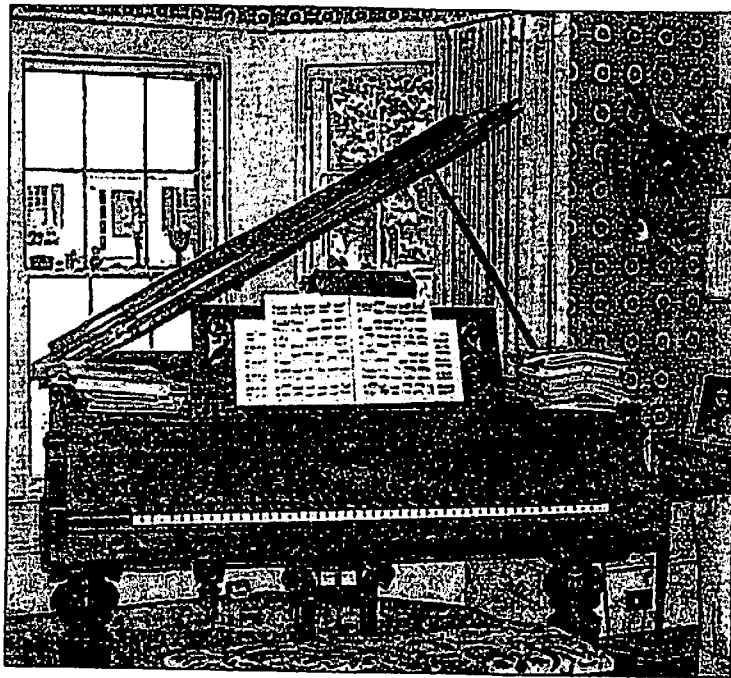
couple's daughter, Juliana Hatfield, a popular pop music singer who spent an afternoon with me to discuss her experiences as a child growing up in this historical house on Washington Street.

"Sometimes the feeling is like someone is playing games with me to get my attention, like a one year-old would do," she added. Juliana described tapping and scratching noises in the walls, which once she put the lights on, would stop. Another memory she recalled was of a night when she awoke frightened by



This Washington Street home is haunted by a baby ghost named Erastus who died here in 1806.

PHOTO BY DEBORA KATZ



Visitors in the front parlor music room have felt Erastus' spirit.

PHOTO BY DEBORA KATZ

experienced the ghost firsthand, but the children and their childhood friends have felt the presence of something. "Any friends who came into the house, especially through the front hallway going up the stairs felt something and were spooked," remarked Julie Hatfield.

"It's not a specific thing that happens; it feels like you are being watched," said the

a noise, and when she sat up in the bed "it felt like someone pulled my hair back."

It would be no surprise to paranormal experts that their ghost has made its presence known to children. "In fact, when full-fledged haunting finally manifests, the home is likely to be occupied by a family with at least one child (most likely a daughter) between the ages of five and fifteen," noted W. Haden

Blackman, author of "A Field Guide to North American Hauntings." Blackman described a psychic energy released by children that appears to attract phantoms (ghosts with an identifiable form), and most often poltergeists (invisible ghosts that demonstrate annoying and malicious behavior.)

The ghost present in the Captain Ezra Prior house may also be attracted to children because he is the spirit of a child, and therefore seeks the young to taunt and play with him. Ten years ago when the family decided to have the house date boarded, they found out the identity of their playful spirit.

Ezra Prior who was the son of Benjamin and Deborah Prior built the large hip-roofed house in 1800. By the age of 17 years Ezra Prior had become a successful mariner. He built the quality house for his new bride, Jane Hunt, who was then only sixteen years old.

Although Ezra was away at sea for long periods of time, the couple still managed to



Children are often spooked in this front stairwell.

PHOTO BY DEBORAH KATZ

have five children in the first nine years of their marriage. The youngest son, Erastus, however, only lived one year. His funeral was most likely in the front parlor room, now the music room, since this was the custom of the times. Besides the front hallway stairwell, it is this room and the bedroom above it where strange noises occur, and where the spirit's presence has been felt.

According to paranormal experts, a ghost present in a house is often a prior resident

who experienced a terrible death within the home. A ghost who only lived in the home for a short period during its lifetime usually haunts that building because it "was either their favorite home or place where they experienced the greatest joy or most profound sorrow," said Blackman.

There is no record of the cause of death for the young Erastus. I located this Prior family's gravesite in Mayflower Cemetery. It appears certain from the tombstone of Erastus that his death was very tragic. Unlike most children tombstones, which are small in size and usually only give a name and date and sometimes no name at all, Erastus stone includes a poem about the fading of a flower and how "pleasure only blooms to die." At the top of the stone is a face with angel wings, known as the Winged Death's Head - a symbol of the short-lived nature of this world and the inevitability of death. The carving seems

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more like a self-portrait of the child who now haunts the place where he spent only a year and ten days of his life.

Even more interesting to the story of this spirited house is the fact that another boy, whose mother was also Jane Hunt Prior, died in the house at the age of one – nineteen years after Erastus' death. It occurred after a tragedy in 1809 when Ezra Prior and Ziba Hunt, Jane's brother, were lost at sea. Jane was left to raise her four children alone in the house at the young age of 25 years old.

Nine years later, she married William Joyce and had another five children here in the house. Her son Samuel Hunt Joyce died in 1825 at the age of one. He is also buried at Mayflower Cemetery but with a tombstone not as elaborate or tragic as the one his mother chose for his step-brother Erastus.

Other than children, workmen have also experienced the ghost at the Captain Ezra Prior house. "They would tell us that they felt like someone was watching them work," noted Julie Hatfield.

Some years ago, the family had a female guest staying in the house. One night while sleeping in the bedroom above the music room, their guest became so scared she

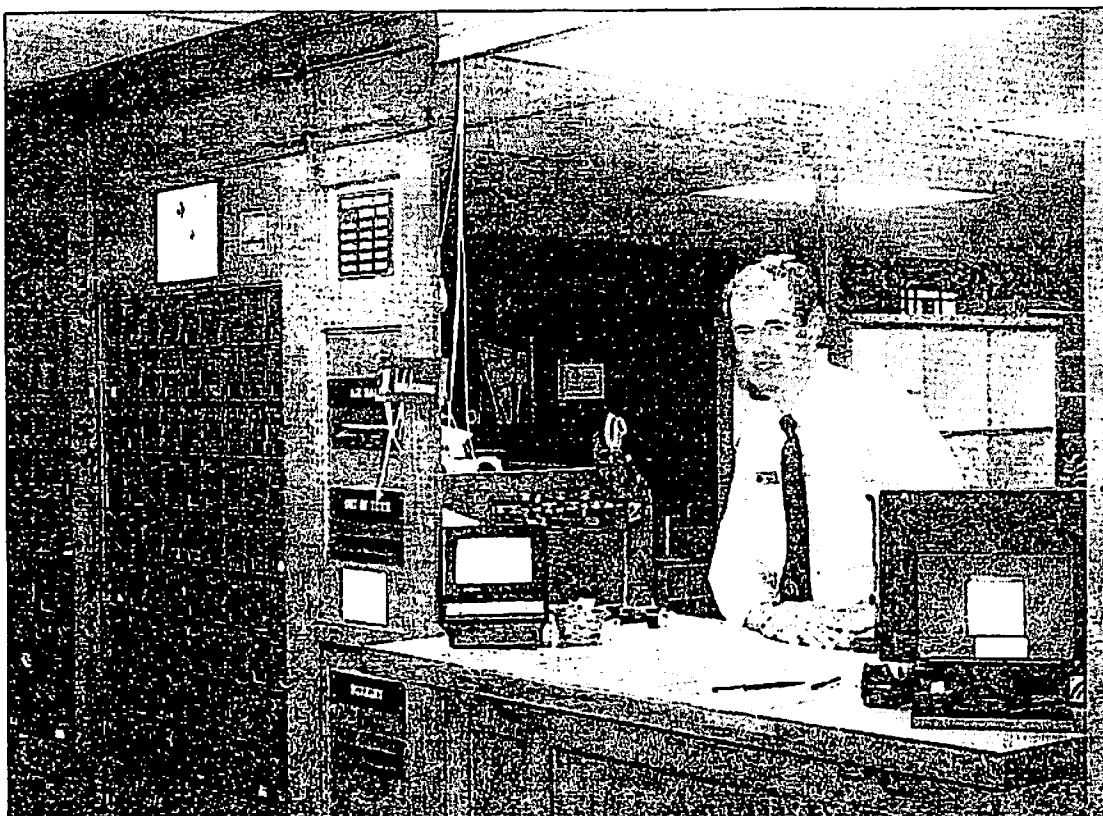


went and got a knife from the kitchen and brought it to be bed with her. "She felt threatened by it", added Juliana who has also heard "unexplainable, weird things" in this bedroom above the front parlor room.

Not far down the road from the Captain Ezra Prior House, there are some unexplainable and strange things baffling postal workers at the Snug Harbor Post Office. Unlike Erastus, the ghost of Emily is not a child spirit. Her voice is distinctly that of a young woman, said postman Bill Smith.

Smith has experienced some mysterious things over the past four years working in the Snug Harbor Post Office. Large poster-sized cards, which list the names of P.O. Box owners, stand on top of the metal boxes inside the office. One is often found knocked off and onto the floor when Smith arrives to work in the morning. He returns it to the top of the postal boxes only to find it on the floor again the next morning. "It's always a certain one...as if Emily doesn't like someone on the list," laughed Smith.

He used to work late at



Postman Bill Smith has encountered the ghost of Emily at the Snug Harbor Post Office.

PHOTO BY DEBORA KATZ

night in the office, sorting mail and other tasks. It was during this time that the ghost made herself known and continued to visit regularly. "She would call my name out loud, and it was very clear. I would be the only person here in the building," said Smith.

Other things began to happen as well. While working at night in the building, Smith would suddenly hear a locked P.O. Box slam shut. (He demonstrated the sound to me during our interview, and I have to say, it made me jump out of my skin for the noise sounded like a gun shot.)

On another occasion, Emily made a physical appearance. Smith looked up from his desk to see a strange light pass by the tall office cabinets. This is called ghost lights by paranormal experts, and is the third most common form of ghostly manifesta-

tion. "These spirits appear as bobbing, glowing orbs wandering through the air," and are considered relatively harmless, said Blackman.

It is unclear why this spirit has chosen to haunt the Snug Harbor Post Office. "I had heard about a ghost at the Snug Harbor Post Office, and we did respond to a call one night about lights going on and off in that building," said Richard Bayramshin, a retired Duxbury Police Sargent. "But, who knows, that could have been caused by faulty wiring," he added.

It is also a mystery who Emily was in her lifetime. Perhaps she is a spirit from the past—a lost soul who went to the post office every day hoping to receive a letter from her lover. Now, she stays to taunt the postman and slam post office box doors as she waits in vain for a letter.

How the spirit got her name is no mystery though: Bill Smith, as most paranormal experts would recommend, gave it to her. Asked if there is any significance to the name, Smith responded smiling, "I just liked the name Emily, so I call her that."

Note to Reader: Next week in this ghostly series we will visit Saint George Street's haunted houses.

Question of the Week Answers

1. Just in case he gets a hole in one!
2. Because she ran away from the ball!
3. Nothing, they just wave!
4. Because he looks silly in an evening gown!